

## THE WORLD OF NATURE AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

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### ABSTRACT

*The world of nature is very important to study of Frost's poetry. By using nature as a background of his poems, Frost clearly demonstrates meaning and values of life and often depicts some treatment of nature and the social situation that have included a characteristic portrayal of humanity. This study enables us to understand Frost's poetical theme and values that would explain his hidden voice of nature and examines human inner mind, exposing its conflicts and harmony through it. Some critics have identified him as a terrifying poet and others labeled him a pessimistic poet or, a dark naturalist. However, he has a constant vision of nature throughout the poems. More than anything else, the speaker of his poems uses sign and symbol of nature that take an identity of others. Furthermore, this study discusses his series of concrete images which echo his poetry and intensify clarification of human life on the conceptions of the world of nature.*

**KEYWORDS:** Robert Frost, World Of Nature, Human Mind, Symbols, Human Experience

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### INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost has been the most widely known and perhaps the most fully appreciated American poet of the Twentieth Century. His poetry was never controversial, banned or summoned. However, his poems are initially criticized as debatable among his critics and readers. Some readers and critics have evaluated his poetry and generalized him as Wordsworth who is best known as a nature poet displaying the panorama of the natural world. But Frost's conception of the natural world is concerned with human relation to nature whereas Wordsworth is religiously devoted. In this respect, John Lynen asserts: "For Frost, nature is really an image of the whole world of circumstances within which man finds himself"(Lynen, 1962:177). As Frost deliberates on the view of human existence in the natural world, Marion Montgomery noted that "His attitudes toward nature is one of the armed and amicable truces and mutual respect interspersed with crossings of the boundaries separating the two principles, individual man and force of the world. But boundaries are insisted open" (Montgomery, 1958: 339-353). In that sense, of course, most of his poetry carries the deep intellectual and emotional conviction that reflects human experience and existence, and his consistent intensity shows sustained imaginative power.

In this paper, my main concern is of Frost's world of nature. While analyzing and comparing Frost's world of nature, I will try primarily to discover if there is a specific pattern in his poems. I am also interested in how Frost's theme of writing recognizes him as a nature poet? Is he really a 'terrifying poet'? To a certain extent, therefore, I will look at the ways in which his poems build an identity in the world of nature. Then, I will also

argue how his nature is different than Wordsworth's and others', and also show how he is closer to the world of nature and human experience.

As we approach how Robert Frost was characterized during his lifetime, we can identify him as a serious poet. In order to evaluate his work, we must understand him far better than he understands himself. However, some critics have condemned and challenged him. Indeed, he wrote volumes of poetry but he was not well recognized earlier and was criticized for his image. At the beginning of his literary career, he was criticized for his grim approach to life. Critics have taken him as a poet who writes on unpleasant realities of New England and its people. But later, his great power of work developed his new philosophical concept for the betterment which pioneered him as a disciplined and honest poet. Because of his crafted writing, readers also find him a poet of affirmation. Although some critics have suspected him as a dark naturalist, he is a poet of enduring greatness. After reading his poems, Louis Untermeyer admits the reality and power of his work:

Frost is by no means the dark naturalist that many suspect. Behind the mask of 'grimness' which many of his critics have fastened upon him, there is a continual elfin pucker; a whimsical smile, a half-disclosed raillery glints beneath his most somber monologues. His most concrete facts are symbols of spiritual values. (Untermeyer, 1920)

Despite his writing is concerned with the natural world, he honestly portrays the complexity of human experience. The symbols of his poems like 'Birches' and 'Wild Flower', 'Wood' and 'Stones Walls', 'Pasture Spring' and 'The Snow of Northern England' are recognized locales from the days of his writing career. If we remove his rural images and symbols from his works, we cannot identify him as a vigorous writer, or absolute genius: successful in speech and meaning in the world of nature. The most widely held misconception about him may be the tendency to regard him as a nature poet exclusively.

*In The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1988), editors Richard Ellman and Robert O' Clair indicate the importance of Frost's work corresponded with the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson, because they have a significant influence on New England settings for their poems and both frequently used it. However, Richard et al. also comment that Frost's poetry is "less[consciously] literary" and it seems that at this point, Frost was eventually influenced by Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. Nevertheless, they praise that "Frost's poems show a successful striving for utter colloquialism" (Ellman & O'Clair, 1988). Several literary critics say the logic of his wilderness in poetry is not projected or fully perceived in advance. However, today everyone knows and loves Frost by his poetic value and many respond to him comfortably. But at Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner in 1959, Trilling expressly labeled him as a terrifying poet

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that literary word. The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. (Trilling, 1959: 451) The manifest of America of Mr. Frost's poem is....rural in a highly moralized way, in an aggressively moralized way. (Trilling, 488)

Actually, Frost is not a terrifying poet at all. If we read a number of Frost's poems, there are no terrible things. So, we cannot say that he is aggressively moralized. In his poems, the mood and atmosphere sometimes show just sympathetic humors and pains, but they are based on realities of nature and experiences. What Trilling had considered about "Design" and "Neither out Far nor In Deep" as terrifying poems is not accurate. After reading Trilling's comments about Frost, it is impossible to label him as a terrifying poet. Why does Trilling think the poem of "Design" is about nature's terrifying

potential for evil? Perhaps, he argues on the reader's self concern. In fact, Frost's "Design" asks questions on the very nature of creation because he declares that each life is tragic. So, Frost has made an ironic reference which expresses rage at the existence of death in nature. As it might be expected, his "Design" shows the structure of the natural world. On the other hand, his "Neither out Far nor In Deep" speaks the secrets behind life's mysteries where "the truth" is relentlessly pursued in the poem itself. Focused on symbolism of nature of human concerns, his interpretation gives us human knowledge that reveals paralleling toward the depth and mystery of the ocean. If we do not miss to read again and again his poems, we can find his specific "irony" and "playfulness." Critic Randall Jarrell clearly asserts about the tone of "Neither out Far nor In Deep": "This recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation, is very rare and very valuable, and rather usual in Frost's best poetry"( Jarrell, 1953). There are no terrifying things in his poems that may violate nature. We can reason, in general, his poetry just represents the facts of life which we face. Thus, Frost is simply a rural, regional poet who understands the beauties of nature and uses simple rural life as the background of his poems. Trilling's such interpretation confuses the reader. David Perkins also argues that Frost's poem "Design" has the "romantic irony", it neither asserts nor denies the reality of evil but merely uses it as a topic to play with"(Perkins,1989). Thus, the landscape of the poem which he creates is the simplicity of human mind where the hidden world of strange life is found. In addition to them, Frost also writes, "They cannot scare me with their empty spaces"("Desert Places" line-13). Then it is clear that the man who is in the "desert place" is not scared of the desert place that he has mentioned. As a consequence, "many people saw Frost as a comforting, grandfather figure"(Bloom, 2003:48).

Although Trilling labeled him as a terrifying poet, he was already canonized the patron saint of American tradition. Donald J. Adams reviews Frost's work in the *New York Times* Book Review,

Frost simply sees the universe as it is and accepts it. He is not terrified by what he sees, and neither should we be. (Donald, 1965: 2)

What Donald J. Adams writes is certainly true. He has accepted Frost as an honest and moralized poet and his poetry obtained as compatible with reality. As Donald mentions, Frost prefers his work in the light of insight. By insight, Donald means a group of ideas and a faith with discipline. Many poets have written poems about natural subjects or phenomena, but Frost usually includes a moment of interactions between a human speaker and a natural subject. He keeps the realization of life in his mind when he presents nature. In that sense, he establishes his imagination observing vivid human conditions within nature, through his labor and self knowledge which have transferred insight into metaphysical world. And this unflinching honesty in revealing the facts between man and nature becomes the recurrent theme in his nature poetry. Hence, his poetry begins in the awareness of life which is manifested in vivid observation of the natural and human world, and the uses of metaphorical expression in his poems are nothing other than a clarification of life.

The poetry readers of this century are thoroughly familiar with Frost's poetic theme which echoes loud and clear in his world of nature. However, some of Frost's detractors belittle him in that his values and views of nature are intimately related. Frost's intentional use of nature creates noticeable symbols and irony throughout his poetry which inevitably leads to a consideration of the role of the narrator. Certainly, his symbolism starts from nature: he has not idealized a system of esoteric symbolism, but has taken his analogies from the world. Hence, Frost is an external nature lover and his values of work are expressed like Lucretian-Wordsworthian kind and even Emerson and Thoreau.

Comparison with Wordsworth is more important, and more plausible. As John Freeman has observed, "It is not my part to prove that but for Wordsworth [Frost] might have been different. But for Wordsworth we should all have been different"(Freeman, 1925: 180). Basil Willey indicates, in sufficiently broad terms, the nature of that difference in his essay *On Wordsworth and the Locke Tradition*:

As Wordsworth is the first, so he remains the type, of the 'modern' poets who, 'left alone' with a vaster material than his, must bear as best they can, unaided by any universally held mythology, the 'weight of all this unintelligible world Keats and Shelly often follow the second of these methods (Willey, 1950:297)

What the word 'nature' meant to Wordsworth is, however, a complex issue. Wordsworth is the quintessential poet as naturalist, always paying close attention to details of the physical environment such as plants, animals, geography, and weather around him. In this regard, Wordsworth is more comparable to Whitman than Frost. On the basic difference between Wordsworth and Frost, Vidushi Sharma states:

Certainly, Frost is not a poet of Nature like Wordsworth is. To some extent, Nature is evidently Frost's subject. But in his poetry Nature is only a background; it is a backdrop behind the humming scenes of human beings at work. Frost has been excessively hailed as a poet of Nature even when he once confessed that he was not a Nature poet. It is said that Frost was influenced by Wordsworth but there is very little information about the nature of the influence. (Sharma, 2011: 55 – 58)

In addition to Wordsworth, we can compare Frost with Keats. Keats and Frost hold a unique position in literature due to their contribution to poetry in English Literature. Both poets seem to share several similar thoughts in their poetry. They have almost the same feelings: their love for Beauty and Nature, and their concern for the Eternal and Political turmoil are also manifested in their poetry. While, Keats's poems also indicate the growth of sympathy like Frost's poems do. "In the mature development of Keats immersion in the delights of nature it assumes the shape of an escape toward which his hyperesthesia drove him, while the interest in and sympathy with human suffering become the second party to a conflict, a conflict we shall see recurring in Keats. He would sing noble humans fallen to the world's cruelties" ( Zigerell, 1949:20 ). They often deal with people interacting with each other and also reflect the Romantic Movement with an emphasis on nature, imagination and emotion. Thus, we can generalize that Frost's poetry is somewhat similar to Keats'.

Frost's reflection always used the strongest weapon against nature and filled his works with the truth behind his poems from personal experience. Sidney Cox says of Frost: "He never talks of loving nature. He has experienced beyond forgetting, how much our relations with her are warfare"(Cox, 1929:32). Gorham Munson caught this spirit in Robert Frost's presentation of struggle when he wrote:

Nature we feel as a sort of friendly antagonist, dangerously strong sometimes, but on the whole a fair opponent Nature and Man always present in Frost's mind, though never insisted upon. (Munson, 1927:10)

Since nature is merely a means for the release of tensions of man, Frost is a poet of 'human' through his poetry of 'nature'. As Harold H. Watts says in Robert Frost and the Interrupted Dialogue, "The bulk of his poetry is a dialogue...Frost puts a variety of questions to the natural world that lies just beyond his door step and receives a variety of answers" (Harold & Watts, 1955:68-87). Obviously, in his work, speakers learn about themselves by exploring nature but it always stays indifferent to the human world.

All of these arguments and observations are important, and may lead us to far fuller understanding of Frost. From now on, I will take an approach to his poems that interpret a few key elements of his world of nature and select a few of them. The visible sign of the poet's preoccupation-the word is not too strong-is the recurrent image, particularly in his earlier work, of dark woods and trees" (Ogilvie, 1959). Frost's trees and forest world have a close relationship with humans and connects humankind to other natural phenomena which widens the relationship to non-human lives.

In "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," the poet looks at the power of nature over humanity. By expressing the reflection of nature, he indicates how we should resolve our obstacles satisfactorily:

The tree the tempest with a crash of wood

Throws down in front of us is not bar

Our passage to our journey's end for good,

But just to ask us who we think we are

Insisting always on our own way so.

She likes to halt us in our runner tracks,

And make us get down in a foot of snow

Debating what to do without an ax. ("On a Tree Fallen Across the Road"1-8, *New Hampshire*, 1923)

Furthermore, "Birches," trees are also making the link between earth and humanity. "Frost portrays the images of a child growing to adulthood through the symbol of aging birch trees"( Elfira, 2010:37 ). The theme of "Birches" is similar to "After Apple-Picking." In addition, based on some lines from Birches illustrates that the speaker is curious about human limits of life. And, sense of 'nature' operates in its beautiful line: "I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree"(54) which symbolizes his desire to peak at heaven for experience. "The Sound of Trees" is another significant poem on this theme. Similarly, the love of nature and beauty is found in "Going for Water." The poems such as "Mending Wall" and "Christmas Trees" examined and elaborated irony and images of rural sphere separating the urban set. Hence, the poems above discussed deal with the power into the natural world which symbolizes growth, state of life and aging.

Birds and birds' songs are often used in Frost's poetry. The influences of them on the human imaginations have simpler reaction. In his poetry, birds are used more frequently than in any other genre and he has written about them with rich source of inspiration, symbols and metaphors. Some of his poems concentrated on them communicate only nature's indifference toward the human world. In many ways, of course, Frost's poems are highly positive, as his own testimony suggests. In "A Minor Bird," he also expresses his feelings which indicate a realization towards the natural world. With the sound and vision of birds, he asserts his emotion viewing the sweetness of natural world. There is an emphasis on naturalized communicative-counterpart between the human and the natural world:

I have wished a bird would fly away,

And not sing by my house all day;

Have clapped my hands at him from the door

When it seemed as if I could bear no more.

The fault must partly have been in me.

The bird was not to blame for his key. ("A Minor Bird" 1-6, *West-Running Brook*, 1928)

"The Exposed Nest" is a poem where innocent sense of life and environment is projected. Frost recognizes the presence of sorrow in another living being and he also encourages us to preserve the families and love. On the other hand, this poem also deals with his own space and existence. Defining his own sphere and existence, he realizes nature and spare of human. "The Oven Bird" is written in sonnet form and describes an oven bird singing. In this poem, Frost has taken 'bird' and 'seasons' metaphorically. "It has been described as a quintessential Frost poem" (Little, Michael R. ed, 2009:347-9). "Several Frost's biographers and critics have interpreted the poem as autobiographical" (Maxson, 2005). His other poem "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" can be read as natural identity. Frost transforms the bird by transferring it to his emotional state but his attitude toward nature is classically shown to a great extent. The same theme is found in the poem of "Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter." Frost uses both illusory and real natural effects to produce a heightened state of awareness. At the same time, he also reflects the significance of birds and bird's songs that admit joy harmony, ecstasy, balance and love. Besides, there is also the image of death and decay in his work that present an ugly aspect of life.

Frost's strongest and most affectionate literary theme in the world of nature is flowers, too. He contemplates the image of flowers effectively to observe the human sentiments which reunite readers with true emotions and feelings. The Flowers invoked by him in his work explore and identify love, beauties, joy and suffering of human life. "Flower Gathering" is Frost's beautiful poem which is written to address his pregnant wife. The poet presents the eternal communication with his wife:

All for me? And not a question

For the faded flowers gay

That could take me from beside you

For the ages of a day?

They are yours, and be the measure ("Flower-Gathering", 9-13, *A Boy's Will*, 1913)

Frost's flowers are symbolized as a catalyst for reconciliation with mankind. "The Tuft of Flowers" explores the existence of mankind and generalizes his loneliness with the human condition. The sense of joy that must have led the mower to admire and spare the flowers is transferred, through the sight of the flowers, to the speaker. In "Leaves Compared with Flowers" the flower is symbolized as beauty but without inner beauty it is just an empty shell. This poem reflects hope and depression of hidden life. Richard Foster calls this poem "a quiet, cryptic, rather self-hidden lyric that comes alive with a chilling darkness of revelation," a sentiment that fully comes to light with the last two lines of the poem"(Foster, 1973:422). In this way, Frost creates a tone of loss and nostalgia through the contemplation of leaf and bark. It is important to notice that his flowers sharply brightened the transitory beauty of life, love and youth. On some occasions, his flowers are also related to sexual feeling or organs. For example, "A Prayer in Spring" organizes the beauty of the present and organs: "Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white"(line-5). Along with them, "The Subverted Flower" internalized about the nature of Frost's sexual-poetic imagination.

'Snow' is another element of Frost's world of nature. It is important to see that he has been engrossed in a simplified world of the New England farmer. His notions of the inspiration located in the natural world that leads the flow of nature's factor and exemplifies as a realistic detail for "all human beings." The 'snow' as a beautiful symbol of the winter season, he often personifies ice, snow, sleet and other freezing cold weather. Significantly, his snow reflects feeling of spiritual, cleansed and optimistic, but sometimes he focuses the need for reconciliation with someone, a loss of innocence, or problems in walking in life. The poem such as, "Dust of Snow"(1923), "Stopping by Wood on a Snowing Evening"(1923), "A Patch of Old Snow"(1916) and "An Old Man's Winter Night"(1916) are important poems where he notices the world of nature and displays human experiences.

Animating human mind and nature, "Dust of Snow" conducts a familiar human conflict. In this poem, the speaker has lost all hopes and is very sad. When he sits under a hemlock tree the poet has the "dust of snow" fallen on himself. Making his mood better he feels relaxed and thankful to the nature for saving his day from being wasted:

Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree  
Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some apart  
Of a day I had rued. ("Dust of Snow", 2-8, *New Hampshire*, 1923)

"Dust of Snow" is similar with "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," noting the similarity in setting but difference in theme and meter. Similarly, Frost depicts the snow in "A Patch of Old Snow" interpreting in terms of relationship of individual principle of nature. Like nature, such relationships make possible a kind of ideal simplification. This poem also contacts a relationship with the natural environment. Perhaps he likens the snow to a symbol and echoes it in the impulse of memory and time. Even though "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "An Old Man's Winter Night" response a kind of ideal sense of nature with 'snow.' "An Old Man's Winter Night" is a statement about life and priorities with an appeal to the human condition of loneliness. As in many such poems, the cold snow and ice show all his wishes to be preserved which means inherent in life. His other poem, "An Empty Threat" also conveys the same impression of natural action. Hence, Frost's 'snow' obviously presents an illness or depression obstacles hindering one's travel planes. Therefore, his sense of 'snow' is not only conducts with human struggle and suffering but also denotes with human ambitions, experience and advancement.

The significance of Frost's nature is not restricted to his poetry, because he had important philosophical insights that could only be appreciated by the right readers. From this we can gather that a sense of symbols and images contemplate his work. The elements of nature are exposed to the majority and they are frequently asserted that enable readers to recall their own experience. The poems discussed in this paper illustrate Frost's peculiar interest and beliefs in the natural world and, how his interpretation is related to life in his era.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have examined and discussed how Frost's the world of nature embodies his persistent contemplation in his poems. As mentioned above, his poems are concerned with subjects other than the natural world and his view of nature possessed a persistent ethical or metaphysical dimension of very substantial importance. However, Frost does not make a clear statement of his theory on nature; he mentions that he hates to read any theory upon which he might be supposed to write. These findings suggest that Frost is more like Keats than Wordsworth because Wordsworth writes about nature in its vital source of values. Yet, Keats writes without restriction of preconceived theory, and so does Frost.

Frost's poems have intellectual content and nature is related to a composite sense of man, but he is less concerned with metaphysics than with behavior and attitudes. However, 'nature' is expressed simply and he is persistently aware of this in his poems. One of the distinctive characteristic of Frost is that his writings are concerned with human relation to nature. Obviously, the elements of the world of nature in his poems are recognized as trees, birds, flowers and snow. These elements represent the human mind and society, and the poet expresses his wide range of human experience. Comparing with some images and symbols, he satirizes on human greed and rapacity. Thus, Frost is different from other poets who believe that life is personal or cultural.

Above all, the findings in this study suggest that his poems are communicative-counterpart between the human and the natural world. Although he was criticized for his grim approach to the life at the beginning of his career but in later years, he was known as an excellent poet. Some critics approached him as a terrifying poet and believed him to be a pessimist or, a dark naturalist. However, Frost has remarkably imposed his poems into a positive attitude. As a consequence, his view of nature is deeply vigorous and fresh where human situation is always existed.

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